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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of a research project in 1993 to address concerns and issues related to education of Aboriginal students in the Shoalhaven area of New South Wales, Australia. Specifically, the purpose of the project was to examine the relationships between Aboriginal communities, students, and their schools, and important outcomes related to employment, unemployment, and further education and training. The research team included Aboriginal education assistants (AEAs) from the participating schools, a local Aboriginal community representative, and representatives of the Koori Centre at Sydney University. Historically, indigenous people have been subjected to a range of research methodologies that have been unacceptable, inappropriate, and offensive. In contrast, this project emphasized the development of culturally appropriate approaches, based on participatory action research, that could be conducted by Aboriginal communities. As well as providing profile information and participating in interviews, each school was invited to develop and implement an action research plan based on their current priorities or concerns in the area of Aboriginal education. This paper includes reflections of research team members and addresses implications for education and research related to government and bureaucratic control and indigenous self-determination, domination by nonindigenous people, community-based decision making and representation, constraints and difficulties faced by AEAs, student concerns about educational relevance, and participatory and collaborative action-oriented research. (LP)

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We're under this great stress and we need to speak out: Reflections on the Shoalhaven Aboriginal Education Research Project

A Paper Presented at the 1993 World Indigenous People's Conference: Education. December 11-17, 1993. Wollongong, NSW, Australia.

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There's too much focus on bad issues and negative stereotypes. We don't talk enough about positive things. There's not enough Koori culture. We need Koori teachers. We need Aboriginal teachers to teach Aboriginal Studies. We learn more about their culture than ours.

Aboriginal Students

The AEA is the pivotal person for self-determination.

Aboriginal Parent

Things are controlled by the school most of the time... AEA's are the meat in the sandwich.

Aboriginal Community Meeting

Some school staff feel the school leadership isn't assertive enough about what should happen in Aboriginal education. The range of sometimes conflicting community demands makes it hard for teachers. There's a danger that teachers may become intimidated doing nothing rather than take a well intended action and be severely and publicy chided for it.

School Principal

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2

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Introduction

The Shoalhaven Aboriginal Education Research Project was negotiated and developed in 1992 and implemented in 1993.

This research project, which is based on the principle of community control and direction of indigenous education research, has operated in support of the basic human right of indigenous people to achieve individual and collective empowerment through self-determination within the Australian nation-state.

The research work has been carried out by two researchers from the Koori-Centre, University of Sydney, supported and directed by a team of Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA's) working in state primary and secondary schools in the Shoalhaven areas of New South Wales and Jervis Bay Territory and an Aboriginal community representative. This mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationship has required the 'researchers' to act as facilitators, secretaries and advisers to the team and to the participating communities and schools. The paper draws attention to the complexities, difficulties and benefits of this approach.

In particular, the paper reflects on the overall research process and its various stages of development and implementation, including the obstacles that have been faced and the main concerns and issues that have emerged. As such the paper is a preliminary report, which will be used to stimulate further discussion and debate within the participating communities and schools and the indigenous education research community. The detailed findings of the research will be presented in 1994.

Research Ethics & Methodologies in Indigenous Education Research

Historically, indigenous people have been subjected to a range of research methodologies that have been unacceptable, inappropriate and often offensive. We have been, and still are, frequently considered to be objects for research and continue to be put under the microscope of other people and for their benefit. The majority of researchers, in our experience, have tended to conform to this neo-colonial and paternalistic mentality and, in most cases, gained individual rewards through professional advancement as a result of their research work.

Our Aboriginal knowledge has been subjected to processes of extraction, like the mining industry has taken minerals from our lands, and transformed into academic text to benefit individuals, institutions and bureaucracies. Researchers, according to this metaphor, can be compared to the miners and the communities to the mines.

At the heart of this issue are concerns about power and control. Illegitimate research is carried out on Aboriginal people and the knowledge is manipulated

and interpreted in terms of data, which tends to reduce the significance of that knowledge to being bits of information to be used in an academic game for personal and institutional advancement. Just as the mining industry has benefited from mineral extraction from Aboriginal land the academic industry, in its exploitation of Aboriginal knowledge, has also benefited from a similar process of extraction.

In contrast, there is an increasing interest in the development of culturally appropriate approaches, based on participatory/collaborative action research, that can be practised by communities themselves when conducting community-driven research in Aboriginal community and education contexts.

Such approaches are concerned about challenging the relations of dominance that have ensnared and disempowered us as Aboriginal people. The justification and rationale for doing this is provided by Aboriginal demands for self determination on the one hand and by oppositional theories and discourses on the other.

By working together and using Aboriginal processes and relationships to examine issues of concern and develop community priorities the right way forward can be established in order to overcome obstacles and create meaningful options. Central to this happening in the right way is the establishment and maintenance of control. This is therefore an issue of fundamental importance for indigenous communities that have been disempowered by the dominant society for so long. Empowerment and the achievement of control in indigenous community contexts is very much about who has power and control.

Because all research activity has great potential either to work against or for community interests it should not be surprising that it is such a contested area.

This research project has taken seriously these legitimate concerns and interests by ensuring that control and direction of the work has been consistently maintained by Aboriginal community and team decision-making.

Critical and oppositional theories and discourses, or ways of talking about and describing research work, provide an important supportive framework for practices that are concerned about challenging the legitimacy of the dominant order and breaking its hold over social and political arrangements. The research project was located within this paradigm. In fact it would have been very difficult not to be located in this paradigm as a logical consequence of supporting and valuing the central principle of Aboriginal self determination, which is a fundamentally oppositional position.

The purpose of oppositional theories and discourses is to transform critical thought into emancipatory action. The concern is with those processes and ways of relating to each other as human beings that promote enlightenment,

empowerment and political action in order to challenge the multiple oppressions that surround us and impact on us.

The challenge for critical intellectuals and cultural workers is to find ways of applying these theories and discourses without creating further impositions and forms of domination. This requires processes that are supportive, facilitatory and collaborative that allow people to speak and act for themselves. The important feature of such a process is that it should be self-sustaining and result in enlightened action through critical analysis.

In developing the research project we have worked and acted in ways that are consistent with these principles. Members of the research team have respected each others right to speak and act on their own behalf within a collaborative framework. Assumptions have not been made, in someone's absence, about whether or not they would support a position or decision. This has also been the case in our relationships with communities and schools. In discussing the project with Elders, community members, representatives and organisations, school staff members and administrators, we have been responsive to the issues, concerns, requirements and demands that they have raised. We have also consistently pointed out that the emphasis of the research is to determine the most appropriate educational responses and initiatives for Aboriginal people and their communities in the Shoalhaven area to take and that the research process is under Aboriginal control and direction to ensure that the principle of self-determination can become a reality.

Development and Negotiation of the Research Plan

At the beginning of 1992 the initial idea for a research project to examine the relationship between what was happening in Aboriginal education in Shoalhaven schools and whether it was acceptable to Shoalhaven Aboriginal communities was discussed by staff of the Koori Centre at Sydney University and the Aboriginal Education Assistants at two Shoalhaven schools. One was a primary and the other a high school. These discussions resulted in the development of a draft research proposal.

In framing the draft proposal it was understood that the process of consulting and negotiating with the range of stakeholders should reflect a code of ethics based on indigenous empowerment and self determination. Such a code was being developed at that time within the Koori Centre at Sydney University and has since been formally endorsed and adopted by the Centre for all research conducted under its auspices.

As we saw it, as staff members of the Koori Centre, we were acting on behalf of the Centre in offering to support a research process that would be determined by Aboriginal decision-making processes. This included the possibility and option

that the draft proposal might not be supported and endorsed by the Aboriginal communities and organisations in the Shoalhaven area. That was, and remained, their right and prerogative.

Discussions broadened within the two schools and initial agreements to proceed in developing the research proposal were given by their executives. At the same time the NSW and ACT Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG's) were informed of the proposal and were asked to provide advice on how we might proceed.

In May 1992, one of the participating high school's held a staff development day to address Aboriginal education issues within the school. We were invited to participate in this professional development activity by informing the staff, community members, parents and other guests of the research proposal and sought their responses Interest was expressed in the proposal by a wide range of people who stated that it was timely and necessary. However, it was also emphasised by the Principal of the school and Cluster Director for the area that approval by the school system would not be automatic and that we would have to submit applications to the NSW Department of School Education. Their expression of concern implied to us that indigenous education research of this kind would not be easily accepted by the education systems and their gatekeepers particularly if it was seen to be shifting the balance of power.

This experience alerted us to the fact that despite our efforts to consult and negotiate widely and appropriately we were only at the beginning of a process that was becoming increasingly complex. Additional concerns were raised by the Principal of a participating primary school, who was fearful that such a process might get out of hand and result in negative media attention. These concerns were allayed after discussion with her and the school's Advisory Principal.

A further invitation to participate in a staff development day at another local high school led to the request by the school's Aboriginal Education Assistant that the proposal include that school in the research. After discussion with the school's executive the proposal was amended to include their participation.

We then received an invitation in June to attend a local AECG meeting to discuss the proposal with the view to it being considered for endorsement. Discussion of the proposal took all of the meeting time and raised important issues and concerns that we were asked to respond to. These included the requirement that the Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness (ASSPA) committees be given the formal opportunity to consider the proposal and a guarantee that the research would not be used for private purposes related to academic study and advancement. These conditions we agreed to and we explained that it had not been our intention to proceed without consulting and negotiating appropriately with all communities, organisations, groups and individuals that were implicated in, or affected by, the proposal.

Further development of the project proposal involved extensive consultation and negotiation with a wide range of Aboriginal people, their communities, schools and organisations. The overall process and dialogue extended throughout 1992 and into 1993. Endorsement for the project was given by Wreck Bay, Roseby Park and Nowra East Aboriginal communities; Jervis Bay, Culburra and Nowra East primary schools and their ASSPA committees; Shoalhaven, Vincentia and Nowra Technology high schools and their ASSPA committees; and Shoalhaven AECG. The ACT and NSW AECG's were also provided with information about the project. The NSW Department of School Education and ACT Department of Education formally agreed to the research proceeding. Support was also provided by the Australian Research Council through the Small Grants Scheme. Efforts to attract funding from government departments, however, were unsuccessful, despite the rhetoric of support for community-based initiatives.

The failure on the part of governments to actively support what we regard as a significant community-based initiative has been the subject of considerable concern to team and community members over the period of two years. This concern has been exacerbated by the feeling that large amounts of money in Aboriginal affairs are being spent on activities and priorities that have very little relevance to people at the grass roots community level. The irony of this is that the rhetoric of self-determination and community-based initiatives is used consistently to justify these priorities and expenditures.

The following model shows the relationships between participating communities, schools and agencies and the associated outcomes of schooling that were to be investigated:

COMMUNITY	PRIMARY SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL	OUTCOMES
Wreck Bay	Jervis Bay	Shoalhaven Vincentia	employment higher education
Roseby Park	Culburra	Shoalhaven Nowra Tech	training unemployment
Nowra East	Nowra East	Shoalhaven Nowra Tech	problems successes

AECG's ——— Departments of Education/DEET ——— ATSIC/DEET/CES

[policies/programs/funding arrangements/consultation processes/future directions]

The research team that was established through this process comprised of the Aboriginal Education Assistants from the participating schools, a local Aboriginal community representative and representatives of the Koori Centre at Sydney University.

Parameters of the Research Plan

The research project was designed to address concerns and issues related to schooling and education for Aboriginal students in the Shoalhaven area of NSW who have traditionally been severely disadvantaged by the school system.

In particular the research project set out to examine the relationships between the Aboriginal communities, the students, their schools and the important outcomes related to employment, unemployment and further education and training. The social justice and equity goals of access, participation, retention and outcomes are being analysed to determine the extent to which schooling and education in the Shoalhaven area is meeting the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal students and their communities on the one hand and the local, state/territory and national strategic and operational goals on the other.

The research design and methodology is concerned with identifying factors that have a predictive value related to school improvement and effectiveness for Aboriginal students. This is being done by comparing situations and relationships between communities and schools over time with what is currently happening and what is proposed for the future. The project is also making use of developments elsewhere to assess their applicability and appropriateness in the Shoalhaven context.

Empirical research of this kind is of critical importance if the concerns expressed in the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody are to be adequately addressed and the processes and outcomes of schooling improved, in line with Aboriginal concerns and aspirations.

It is also worth noting that at the time we developed the project the first triennium for the NAEP was nearing completion and there had been no announcement of an evaluation strategy to examine whether the policy and its associated Strategic and Operational Plans had been successful. The research project was seen as representing such an evaluation in one area where there is a large Aboriginal population.

The research project has been a significant attempt to examine the complex relationships between community concerns, wishes and aspirations relating to schooling and Aboriginal education, including access to and involvement in decision-making, and the institutional responses in terms of access, participation and outcomes that continue to be of serious concern to Aboriginal people. It has

attempted to make links between issues and concerns raised by students, parents, community members, teachers, educational decision-makers and administrators and those involved at the state/territory and national levels in determining policy and funding initiatives.

The research questions that have provided a framework for the project have included: What specific programs and targeted support measures have been implemented?; What rationales have been developed to explain and justify such measures?; To what extent have the schools developed strategies to encourage staff, students and community members to appreciate and value these developments?; What evidence is there to demonstrate that outcomes are improving and what kinds of improvements are being sought by the different interest groups (do the goals of equity and social justice and the concerns related to Aboriginal identity, culturally appropriate curriculum and self determination contradict each other?); Has targeted support made any appreciable difference?; What do the students and graduates regard as their most positive and negative experiences?; What are the implications of such research findings for the on-going development of state/territory and national policies and programs?, of school policies and practices?, and of the efforts and involvement of Aboriginal people, their communities and organisations? Specific sets of questions were then developed for each group of stakeholders: students, parents and community members, school staff, school principals and those working in education systems, government departments and representative organisations.

Implementation of the Research Plan

Communication between team members and with schools, communities, organisations, and departments has been complex because of the large number of people who have been involved in the process and their dispersed locations. One of the main responsibilities of the two researchers has therefore been to maintain a regular flow of information and feedback. This has involved countless phone calls, faxes and written communications. The development and maintainence of clear lines of communication has been critical in the effort to achieve the objectives of the research with such a large and diverse group of individuals, groups, organisations, schools and systems. The researchers supported and facilitated dialogue with and between team members who were working in their different school and community contexts. The logistics of this have often been daunting.

Schools, communities and workplaces were visited many times during both the development stage in 1992 and the implementation stage in 1993. Sometimes these visits produced very little in terms of research data, but provided important continuity and support when seen as part of the overall research process. In fact there were many conversations and discussions that were were not directly part of the research data collection process but which made important contributions to the overall development of a sense of purpose and commitment.

The research plan for 1993 was negotiated carefully with the participating schools, communities and workplaces and changed when necessary to reflect and respond to changing priorities and demands. We should emphasise that although the plan was adhered to as much as possible there were many instances when the anticipated meeting, interview or discussion did not happen because of unforseen circumstances. This required great flexibility, patience, understanding and persistence from all concerned.

Sometimes it was necessary to follow a hunch or respond quickly to an unexpected opportunity. Very often this resulted in important discussions and contributions to the research. By being respectful of relationships and the Aboriginal way of doing business over a long period of time the research gained strong credibility from the Aboriginal community. This process was much more exploratory, holistic, supportive, intuitive and cyclical than the typical linear, predetermined, inflexible, imposing and fleeting approaches Aboriginal people are used to encountering. Because control of the process was in the hands of Aboriginal people it was understood that there was no point in trying to force things. What was expected to happen might not happen when anticipated but rather when the time was right or it might not happen at all.

Because most people were very sensitive about the issue of the researchers documenting their ideas and concerns, notes were taken of discussions, interviews and meetings rather than tape recordings and transcriptions. The notes were later typed up as confidential drafts for amendment and given back to the respective individuals and groups. Sometimes no changes were requested. Others became involved in working on a number of drafts as further ideas and concerns came to them. For the researchers this was one of the most demanding and time consuming but rewarding aspects of the research. This was because the process for many challenged them in ways that they they had not expected and they found it stimulating and creative. As one person put it, usually questionaires and surveys are very impersonal, especially when something incomprehensible arrives for you to fill in by ticking boxes or writing in a confined space. This project deliberately avoided such approaches which so many people find either irrelevant or frustrating.

As well as providing profile information and participating in interviews, each school was invited to develop and implement an action research plan based on their current priorities or concerns in the area of Aboriginal education. This for many proved to be a difficult undertaking. It was clear to the researchers that this was largely viewed as an imposition in an already overstretched set of institutional routines and responsibilities. For some it was an uncomfortable process because it highlighted the difficulty of making something happen in an area fraught with problems, such as increasing the participation and involvement of parents in the school and its decision-making forums.

Our work in the schools has been difficult and demanding. The initial interest in the project was not sustained by all staff participants. As the research progressed some appeared quite threatened because the control was not located in their domain. There are a number of other possible explanations for this shift which we will analyse in the research report. We are nevertheless very grateful for the support which has been given.

We are very aware that the research has raised difficult and uncomfortable issues for many non-indigenous people to struggle with. This is in our opinion one of the strengths and virtues of what has been attempted. Without this transitional awareness and the tension it has produced there is little possibility of schools and school systems making the necessary paradigm shift to accomodate Aboriginal demands for self-determination and power and control in decision-making.

We have also experienced difficulty in our work with the three main Aboriginal communities. It has not been possible to engage uniformly which each of the communities, which have very different characteristics and dynamics. One of the communities has been very involved in working through issues of concern to them. The other two communities have not engaged at all as communities but individuals have participated. This issue will also be analysed in more detail in the research report.

An important part of the research has involved the writing and presentation of conference papers. Five papers have been presented at major national and international conferences, including this one. This has given us the opportunity to carefully consider and analyse some of the major aspects of our work as it has been in progress and receive feedback from others working in the area of indigenous education research, social policy and cultural politics.

Personal Reflections of Research Team Members

The personal reflections of members of the research team are included to indicate how the work has impacted on us in different ways:

AEA team member: We wanted to see what is really happening and what the outcomes of education really are in black and white. We needed to be able to voice our opinions, concerns and needs, so that we can plan properly for the future.

The only difficulty was trying to set things up around people's timetables and priorities. A lot of discussion happened out of school hours.

The highlight for me has been when we talked to the kids under the trees about what they want to see happening and their concerns about education.

School staff have been very positive about being involved in the project, even if the report turns out to be critical of current policies and practices.

It's taken a lot of time, and people aren't used to that. Aboriginal people also have very strong concerns about giving information and not getting anything back. But, because we've done things in the right way and we've kept people involved and informed over a long period of time, people in the community have opened up to us.

As a community we hope that this project is going to influence decision-makers who have the power to make things happen and to change things according to what we want to see happening.

This project has involved the community, students and teachers looking at alternative options for learning. By talking about this for a long time it's helped to focus our attention in a way that wouldn't otherwise have happened.

AEA team member: It's been extremely important for me as an Aboriginal person to be involved in this research. The great satisfaction I got out of it was to deal with the grass roots of what it's all about: our Elders, Aboriginal educators and the Aboriginal children and community members.

I felt very strongly about doing it, especially because we had a chance through this conference and by publishing a report to get our message through to people about what's really happening and what our concerns are.

I've worked in government departments for 30 years and know that we only get to a certain stage and then we get squashed. This research I knew would assist us to get our message across about what we're having to deal with and the stress of it.

It's very hard for the sytems to understand that we're here to serve our community and our Elders as well as our workplaces.

The only obstacles to doing this research have been presented by the school system. There's no area, for instance, within the school grounds for us to identify with, which made it hard to focus on the work.

It's been a comfortable process. Time was provided to do things properly. Decisions were not made overnight. It followed the traditional Aboriginal way. We know we haven't been pushed into anything we didn't agree with. This has been the first research project I've been involved with that I've felt comfortable with. The feedback from the community has been very very positive. People have praised it highly. I just hope that enough people will look at this and try to do something about what needs to happen.

We need to right the wrongs. I also hope this will help the next person in this position so that the issues, concerns and problems will be dealt with. We're under this great stress and we need to speak out. We just don't get enough opportunity to do this. It's helped me to be able to know my strengths and weaknesses. I've gone over in my mind as an Aboriginal person what we're confronted by and expected to handle and we just can't. It's certainly been worth the effort. It's made me realise what we're up against and how much I need to rely on our Aboriginal Elders.

It's also helped me to cope in a school that's so negative about Aboriginal people in general. I've heard lots of comments about doing something like this project and having someone come in from outside. It has made people feel quite threatened. I think the ones most threatened were the ones working in special programs for Aboriginal kids, and the executive. Certain staff members were never selected to be involved, more or less as a cover up. A lot have very negative attitudes but they've been hidden away. The project was never really given priority by the school, but we worked through that anyway. I would have liked to have seen it gain much more importance.

AEA team member: It was very important for me to participate in this process. It brings to the front what Koori parents have been saying for years: "Why aren't our kids succeeding at high school?" "Why are they leaving at the age of fifteen years, or sometimes earlier?" "Where do they go after school?" Our kids come from primary to high school full of confidence but a lot of this is lost in the first few years. Why?

If we can find some of the answers and practice them and some of them work then it was well worthwhile. It is for our kids and they are our link with the future.

The highlights of the research have been to get together with the researchers in the team and the group discussions we've had especially with the students.

I was concerned about the project not getting any real financial support. I was also concerned about some of the difficulties the researchers experienced in trying to talk to the Koori community and the time they had to spend away from their homes.

I hope that our kids will be able to get a better education and that our Koori parents, Elders and community will all work together to try and make this happen by standing up and speaking out and helping to make decisions that will affect our kids future.

AEA team member: The highlight for me were getting together and talking about different schools and putting our ideas together.

My concern is, why are the kids good at primary school and when they get to high school they get into low classes?

We need to get the communities to stop fighting each other and get them to support the kids better at the school level.

The kids need family support. A lot of the kids aren't getting that now.

We need Land Councils, ATSIC, departments and other organisations to get behind education and do something. They need to support what we're doing in the school.

Where are the kids going after school? What is there for them when they leave? What support do they get? This is a never ending cycle. To do something you've got to have money. These kids are our future. Adults can go to meetings and make decisions for kids, but has anyone ever asked the kids what they want?

I think these kids need to have goals and work towards these goals with support. They need to get their education when they're young. In a white man's world you need to have that little piece of paper.

AEA team member: In my position I thought it was really important to be part of the team. I'm concerned about the kids' progress. The way I see it, Aboriginal kids are still failing.

The word 'research' is just like 'counsellor' or 'welfare'. We just cringe! But I felt comfortable with this research. I felt comfortable from the start. We went through all the right processes. We went to the community first and then we went to the school. We did it in the right way.

As we started the research, I realised that it wasn't only our school or our Koori kids in the school that were below average on the academic side. Similar problems occured in all the other schools.

There have been a lot of highlights and things I've got out of this. The strength in the community and the concerns they have has been very important. It made me realise where my commitment is as an AEA. It made me look at my position and role as an AEA.

The feedback from the community about the research has been very positive. I always knew the community was the vital point.

The pressures and difficulties I've had to handle have not so much been with the school, more with the school leaders. I felt that they put up obstacles that I had to deal with for the project to be done properly and our tasks to be finished.

Often I have not been informed of messages or correspondence until the last minute. Sometimes this has been intentional because I feel that this project has not been given any priority.

For anyone else considering doing anything on indigenous education they should sit down and think carefully about why they want to do it. It's a long and slow process. I think it's really been worth the effort. Through this process we found out a lot about the system and where our Aboriginal people and kids fit into education. Hopefully our kids are going to benefit from better outcomes because of this sort of study. It's probably going to take a while though to get there because of the way things are.

Non-Aboriginal researcher: As the only non-Aboriginal person working in the team I have had to carefully consider my position and reasons for being involved in the project throughout the entire research process.

In the initial stages I was challenged by a number of Aboriginal people to respond to concerns about my motives for wanting to carry out this work. One person in particular expressed the opinion that I was only doing it for personal advantage, despite assurances that this was not the case. After explaining that the Koori Centre has a strong commitment to supporting community-based initiatives and that my work involved providing professional support in the areas of indigenous education curriculum, research and development, most people were satisfied that they were not being exploited. The suspicion never quite went away for some, however, and I have had to live with that. This has had the effect of ensuring that I never took for granted the importance of the work or my relationship to it.

As the research process unfolded over the two years the importance of being clear about why such work is necessary has been highlighted. The most significant openings and opportunities have been provided because we have demonstrated a willingness to be supportive, flexible and responsive and a concern to be respectful of doing things appropriately in the Aboriginal way. Central to this has been the commitment to individual and community empowerment and self-determination. Every effort has therefore been made to sustain the participation and collaboration of team members, community members and the schools and their systems.

Paradoxically some of the things we expected to happen didn't, no matter what effort we made, while at other times we were pleasantly surprised by something happening that had not been planned but which made a valuable contribution to the research.

The research has been extremely demanding but very rewarding. It has demonstrated to me in a profound way the importance of facilitation and support in comunity-based action research. It has also reinforced my appreciation of the value for indigenous communities in undertaking this kind of work as part of the

struggle for rights within the framework of self-determination. Without such an undertaking it is inconceivable to me that any meaningful change could happen. The risk will always be that other people will define what is important and appropriate the language and symbols of the culture to ensure compliance and conformity. Only through individual and collective struggle at the community level can this manipulation of consent be effectively countered and genuine empowerment and self-determination realised.

My most valued memories of this work involve the relationships I have been privileged to have with the other research team members and those in the communities.who worked so hard with us to realise their own hopes and visions. My most serious concern is that these hopes and visions will not be widely understood, appreciated or supported by the non-indigenous community and the education systems which continue to impose inappropriate values and processes on indigenous people and their aspirations.

Aboriginal researcher: It would be too complex to describe all the feelings and emotions which I have had to carry with me through this research process. On one side we needed to stay conscious of representing the Koori Centre with integrity. On the other side it was paramount that the other team members and communities were fully consulted and informed about every move and decision we were making.

We have tried our best to turn the work into a dynamic education process in which we shared information, knowledge, experience and expertise with the AEA's and community people.

I realised that just using that word 'research' was going to make things complicated from the start. You can't blame any indigenous person for being suspicious of research. For too long now we have been subjected to bureaucratic and institutional forms of imposition, deception and promises.

Over the last two years I have managed to keep things balanced despite having many personal difficulties I've had to deal with. As well as this I've been sensitive to the rhythms and values which Aboriginal people live by.

I have noticed a lot of personal changes in the other team members in this time. They have become a lot more assertive in their roles. Whenever an obstacle stood in the way of the work it was challenged. Knowing what their responsibilities and commitments were, they stood by their cultural principles. They have been very courageous. It is nothing less than that. Some of them are in the school on their own with no emotional support, and yet they are the key people if any meaningful self-determination and community decision making is ever to be fostered and achieved.

We all realise very clearly what sort of systems and structures are confronting and controlling us. It seems that we are often outnumbered and outmanouvered in our efforts to achieve self-determination. To add to this dilemma, we are up against the same system which has incorporated Aboriginal people to do its work. These people tend to become part of the problem rather than being part of the solution.

I guess it was my destiny to find out the hard way what systems, structures, politics, management and control is all about. I now realise very clearly that there are people in positions of influence who have control over materials, funds and resources that should be available for community-based initiatives. This awareness has just made me more determined to resist those people and processes that are standing in the way of community self-determination.

I have a suspicion that the final report will be undermined and contested by powerbrokers who will do everything they can to protect their own interests. If the report is controversial, from their point of view, there is a strong possibility that it will be critiqued by bureaucrats and their systems. It is doubtful whether the communities and other people involved, who are the major stakeholders in the research, will ever get to see this critique. It is also possible that the work will be appropriated by the systems in order to defuse its effectiveness or serve some other interests. From our own experience we have seen this happen and we are prepared to defend what we have struggled to achieve. This work has been carried out in the spirit of solidarity and emancipation. For it to continue to be an empowering process it needs to continue in this way without being co-opted or undermined by the agents or institutions of the dominant society.

Critical Issues and their Implications for Communities, Schools & Systems

In order to stimulate further discussion and debate during the drafting of the research report we want to raise some of the critical issues that we feel have emerged during the reseach process. Our interest in raising these issues in this paper, and providing further opportunity for input, is consistent with our concern to encourage as much reflection, analysis and dialogue as possible. The issues will be addressed in greater detail in the research report and are here presented only in summary form. It should also be kept in mind that these issues do not relate uniformly to each school and community. Different places have different dynamics, values and priorities. What may be an issue of major concern in one situation may not be seen as an issue elsewhere. However, these issues are seen by us as being critical because they have a direct relationship with the overall effort of indigenous people in the Shoalhaven area to achieve the elusive goals of empowerment and self-determination within the Australian nation-state.

<u>Government and bureaucratic control and indigenous self-determination:</u> There is a tension between what is implied, and demanded, by the calls for indigenous empowerment and self-determination and the impositions of governments, their

bureaucracies and school systems. Despite the rhetoric of policies and programs, there is evidence to suggest that indigenous people and their communities in the Shoalhaven area are not universally empowered to achieve their goals and aspirations in relation to education.

In our view this has a lot to do with the power that bureaucratic systems have to co-opt our people and appropriate the language and symbols of our culture in order to maintain privilege and control. Schools and school systems play an important part in this effort to ensure that the dominant paradigm is not seriously challenged because they have a gatekeeping role and function which they perform on behalf of the state. They are therefore very much about manipulating consent through social control and imposition. What can't be controlled directly will therefore be contained and defused by the skillful use of language and symbols, especially in the development and implementation of policies and programs.

The control and manipulation of resources and funding is an important feature of this uneven relationship. Whenever we have to take part in the process of trying to secure resources or funding we come up against this fundamental problem. We are locked into these systems and most of the time we find it hard to see beyond them. To try to think of real alternatives and then try to achieve them is more often than not impossible, so we either don't bother or we give up in frustration.

Domination and imposition by non-indigenous people: The relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people in schools and school systems, as well as in other areas of indigenous affairs and in contemporary society generally, is complex. There are well documented historical reasons why this relationship is so uneasy and problematic.

Our demands for indigenous self-determination are based on a deep concern that we be able to, and allowed to, have control over our own affairs and destinies, after having suffered over two hundred years of abuse and denial in our our land.

For this to mean anything it has to allow for us to take real control of our daily lives, especially in our relationship with institutions that can either work for or against our interests. The schools are one of the most important institutions that impact on our lives and so we must have effective control of them in one way or another. This can either happen through our increased participation in decision-making or through our setting up alternative structures and processes.

We are aware of many non-indigenous people who work in the schools and school systems who are strong supporters of what we are trying to achieve, and we appreciate that. We are also aware that there are some who are fearful of doing anything because they might get it wrong or be criticized. We understand this dilemma and believe that it needs to be addressed as a matter of priority. There are also people who get involved in our affairs who are doing more harm than

good by imposing their wills on our efforts to do things our way. Some of these people hold positions of influence and have the capacity to block our legitimate right to self-determination. We ask of those people that they consider very carefully their motives and start following and supporting rather than imposing and manipulating or otherwise withdraw altogether.

A related issue, which was raised with us by several non-indigenous school staff members, concerns the increasing pressure on them to be concerned about and deal with a wide range of contemporary social, cultural and political demands as well as the additional workloads created by the devolution of responsibilities within the education system. Aboriginal education, as they see it, is one of these demands, which even for the concerned and committed can be hard to consistently respond to in ways which are appreciated by Aboriginal students, parents and community members. For the unconcerned, uncommitted or racist staff members it can provide a convenient argument to hide behind.

One staff member put it like this, "Teachers are finding it difficult to adjust to all these changes. We're constantly innundated with changes and requirements. It's never ending. The biggest disadvantage is that teachers don't have enough time for the kids anymore. It's heartbreaking for teachers. The bureaucracy, Head Office, has all these bright ideas. I don't think we've got enough time to deal with all this. It's just relentless. It just piles up. Morale is an issue. When teachers lose that enthusiasm the kids notice it. The powers that be have no idea of what is happening, or what they're doing". This concern is by no means isolated and has serious implications, not just for Aboriginal students but for all students, for the lives of the staff members themselves and ultimately for what it means if we are to have any chance of creating a more sane and compassionate society in the future. We would therefore urge the schools and school systems to do everything they can to properly address this 'cry from the heart'.

Community-based decision-making and representation: From what we have already stated it should be clear that decisions about indigenous education policies, goals and priorities have to be made by, or have direct relevance to, people at the local community level. This should go without saying, and yet it is one of the most problematic issues that we have been confronted by.

There is no shortage of committes and representative organisations that purport to represent or support community interests and concerns. The most notable in the Shoalhaven area are the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committees, the Regional Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee (RAEAC), and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG's), which have local, state/territory and national connections.

Nevertheless, and without wishing to or intending to denigrate their efforts, there is clearly a need to consider the roles and functions of these committees more

carefully. From our discussions with people in the Aboriginal communities there is a general cynicism about people representing and doing things on their behalf, especially when this happens at a distance or is removed from regular public scrutiny. This cynicism is compounded by the often perceived problem of committees having a life of their own and reflecting bureaucratic or systems priorities. One of the communities has in fact stated to us that it is not represented at all by the current AECG arrangements and probably never has been. This has serious implications which we feel need to be addressed with some urgency.

Constraints and difficulties faced by AEA's: One of the most frequently used expressions we have heard, or expressed ourselves, is that AEA's are the 'meat in the sandwich'. While this can have its funny side, it more usually refers to the pressure that AEA's are under to represent community concerns and interests, support students in their daily crises and difficulties and act as an agent of the school and school system. This can therefore be a very demanding and stressful role.

As one parent expressed it, this is a pivotal role which has a critical bearing on whether anything approaching self-determination can be achieved in education within the schools and school systems of Shoalhaven.

Some AEA's in the participating schools are well supported and appreciated by staff, students and communities for the valuable work and functions they perform. Others, however, have a much harder struggle and are seriously 'at risk' of burnout because of the emotional isolation and abuse they face.

The schools and school systems must take responsibility for this failure to provide acceptable and appropriate standards of support, including a proper regard for the cultural status and responsibilities that AEA's have. In one school situation a prominent Aboriginal community member and parent stated, "They have no respect for the AEA. Her role is denigrated. She has to work from a dingy office. She's not allowed to visit the agencies, or parents, which is important to promote and encourage participation...Whilst the position is not respected by the school the community will not respect it." This is a serious indictment of that particular school and school system , which should not remain unaddressed.

There are a number of related issues which also need to be reviewed. These include: professional status, roles, relationships and responsibilities; career pathways, training and employment opportunities; and, working conditions.

Cultural space for indigenous staff, students, parents and community members: This point relates to the previous one, insofar as it is important for AEA's to be able to operate from and within culturally appropriate and acceptable spaces. Where such space is not available the work of the AEA can become intolerable,

reinforcing the concern that they are there only to keep the lid on things without being able to promote cultural values, goals and priorities.

If the state is serious about wanting to support efforts to improve access, participation and outcomes for indigenous students, and provide the opportunity for parents and community members to participate meaningfully in decision-making, this is one very tangible way of enhancing that possibility.

An alternative to this, if appropriate support and interest is not forthcoming, might have to be that communities find other ways of pursuing their educational priorities outside of the state system. Although this can be a daunting prospect there are a number of successful community-based and controlled models around the country which offer exciting possibilities for those who are interested and motivated in examining them.

Student concerns about relevance: All of the issues which we have raised have not escaped the attention of the Aboriginal students, for whose benefit these policies and arrangements are meant to be operating.

The common concern and complaint raised by primary and secondary students was that schools are not providing them with enough Koori culture and studies. The value of the Year 11/12 Aboriginal Studies course was recognised by secondary-age Aboriginal students but they pointed out that so few of them made it that far for it to be of any value to them. With the further introduction of the Year 7-10 Aboriginal Studies course this concern may be relieved. However, there is the broader issue of what the school as an institution means for these students and the overwhelming response continues to be negative. Many Aboriginal students at both primary and secondary levels expressed the view to us that things are boring and not relevant to them and they often have to put up with demeaning or racist attitudes.

The following points of view, raised in a discussion by a group of primary-age Aborginal students, illustrate these concerns in a graphic way: "Most white people are prejudiced to us Aboriginal people. The teachers don't appreciate our culture. We try to be friends but they treat us like dirt, like we're not human. We'd like to go on excursions with Aboriginal Elders and learn how to make boomerangs and digeridoo's....The Aboriginal Studies Unit should go for longer. When people come in they don't teach us a lot of things. They need to go into more depth. We'd like to have an Aboriginal student council/class in the school for Aboriginal students in Year 5/6...It would be a practical way of learning things and strengthening our identity. But it would probably add to some of the problems. The more we would have the class the more trouble we'd cop. But why should we suffer because of this? We have to learn their culture, why shouldn't we learn ours?"

The concerns and aspirations of Aboriginal students must be taken more seriously by the communities, schools, school systems and governments if they are to have any chance of breaking through the cycle of frustration and despair that has characterised Aboriginal education over the years. No amount of policy making, committee work or political rhetoric will wipe away this uncomfortable reality. A more serious engagement by all concerned with young Aboriginal people is called for.

Participatory/collaborative action-oriented research: This research project has demonstrated that it is important for indigenous people and their communities to engage in the serious work of examining issues related to improving indigenous education. In our case this has been done in a spirit of participation and collaboration with each other and with others who are trying to make sense of things and create more culturally appropriate and relevant learning environments and experiences for young Aboriginal people.

This work is extremely demanding and time consuming and requires the ability to abandon preconceived notions about how things are or how they should be. However, the rewards are very substantial and well worth the effort.

At a time when bureaucratic ways of thinking about and structuring reality are being increasingly foisted on us this approach offers real potential for maintaining oppositional and alternative world views and perspectives. This is what gives the approach such power in the hands of Aboriginal people and others who have seen what 'the system' has to offer and are far from convinced.

We hope that this work will continue into the future in the Shoalhaven after this groundwork has been laid and recommend it to others who are pursuing the goal of indigenous self-determination.

Conclusion

The Shoalhaven Aboriginal Education Research Project has been a significant attempt to address the continuing concerns of Aboriginal people and communities in the Shoalhaven areas of New South Wales and Jervis Bay Territory in relation to indigenous education.

The results of this work are yet to be reported in detail. This paper represents a further opportunity for the participating Aboriginal communities, and the schools and school systems that serve them, to consider the most appropriate ways of responding to the significant challenges that have been identified through the research. It is especially fitting that this can happen through the forum of the World Indigenous People's Conference on indigenous education, which is taking place in this area at this time.

Further responses to the issues being examined in the research are therefore invited from not only the participating communities, schools and school systems, but also from the wider national and international indigenous education research community.

The levels of fear and anxiety that have been displayed by some non-indigenous and indigenous people who have been involved in this research gives us cause for concern. However, we are convinced that we are on the right track and are determined to pursue the objectives that have guided us to this point. Our expectation is that there may well be a backlash because we have chosen to adopt such a strong position and we have spoken out against injustice, imposition and domination. We are prepared to face such a reaction in the belief that it is time to call a halt to the empty rhetoric and the false promises of so many people caught up in the systems which are meant to be serving our interests.

During our work in the schools we have noticed many things written on walls and noticeboards. The two which most caught our eyes, and which are worth serious reflection from anyone interested in, or responsible for, change of this magnitude, we will pass on to you in the hope that they will promote the 'new order of things'.

It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out,
nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle,
than to initiate a new order of things.

Machiavelli

The future is not someplace we are going to
but somewhere we are creating.
The paths to it are made not found,
and the activity of making them
changes both the maker and the destination.

Phillip Adams